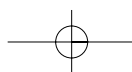


From the comfort of an old Batonka stool,
Keith Clover takes a view of Africa, its
 tigers and a fly fisher's life in general.

Maslow, *the* Lady Jacqueline and a Batonka Stool

There are, or hopefully will be, a couple of events in every angler's life that highlight the undeniable privileges we enjoy as sport fishermen. The awareness of these privileges is regularly, albeit momentarily, brought to our attention when on the water. Landing a trophy fish in an exotic location, connecting with our natural surroundings, enjoying a cold beer after a hard day's fishing, or watching openbilled storks speckle the deep blue African sky are a few such examples.

While I was guiding a group of travel journalists on Kariba recently, a surprising find led me to having an epiphany, making me realise just how fortunate we sport fishermen really are. The banks of the river in the Matusadona National Park are scattered with a fantastic assortment of game and birdlife, and with some free time (since the journalists were on a game cruise), I decided to work the submerged bankside vegetation with a popper. The previous evening, while fishing for bream, we were frequently smashed up by tigers as they hammered our floats being jigged slowly back through the submerged grass. Since it was late February, all the rivers flowing into Kariba were full, resulting in greenish discoloured water and dispersed food – not ideal conditions when targeting tigers on fly. While working my popper along a grass bank, a strange shape in the water caught my attention. On closer inspection I discovered a weathered and slightly battered Batonka stool, half buried in the waterside fringes. Without much thought I picked it up, grinning at my good fortune, and immediately went back to the fishing.



To me, targeting tigers on fly is definitely one of the more extreme angling disciplines. Gut-wrenching strikes followed by the all but compulsory aerial display, razor teeth and bony jaw together ensure that the angler is kept honest when battling these magnificent fish. Although tigers are targeted subsurface with streamer-type flies most of the time, when conditions allow there is not much that beats casting a surface fly to charging wakes as these ferocious predators hunt baitfish in submersed vegetation.

OUR QUARRY

It is useful to understand the distribution of tigers through the water column when targeting this species. Tigerfish will devour any fish up to 40% their own

size, including their kin and, for this reason, will generally stick with others of a similar size. African waters, similar to most wild places on our wonderful continent, are a dog-eat-dog (or more precisely, striped-water-dog-eat-striped-water-dog) environment. For this reason one can fairly confidently predict the size of fish most likely to be caught in a specific area. Very roughly, larger fish occupy the relatively safe deeper water. Average-sized fish, not risking the deep water where there is a chance they will be eaten by their bigger brethren, inhabit the medium depth water. The smallest fish are unfortunately forced into the shallows where they seek shelter from their marauding cousins, while at the same time having to keep an eye out for avian attack from above.

Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising that when targeting tigers with surface lures, the majority of fish landed are in the midsize range (2 - 6lb). I suppose it comes down to the age-old debate on quantity versus quality. Now for me any tiger on a surface lure gets a big stamp of quality. As for quantity, at the right time of year under suitable conditions quantity is not a problem. With tens of kilometres of submersed shoreside vegetation at one's disposal, you can confidently walk a 100m beat with better than average odds of attracting at least a couple of strikes. On most occasions, once a suitable looking area has been identified, you can expect two to three strikes before having to move on. Ideally, what you must look for is shallow to medium depth waters

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of roughly 2 - 3ft containing a healthy spread of vegetation, including submerged grass, water plants and timber. This should drop off into deeper water from where tigerfish can launch their attack on the unsuspecting baitfish.

HOW WE CATCH THEM

I have found that once your cast has been made, it is best to leave your popper where it has landed for a good five to ten seconds before commencing the retrieve. Often it is during this wait that you will be treated to a strike. Following the wait, a series of sharp strips aimed at providing maximum water disturbance and noise from your popper, followed by pauses, should provide enough commotion to draw a strike. It is important to resist the urge to strike as the fish hits the popper. Rather let the fish re-enter the water with your popper before striking.

The typical leader setup is made up of 7ft of hard 15 - 20lb mono. Attached to this, with an Allbright Knot, is 2 inches of No 5 piano wire and, finally, your popper of choice, attached with a Haywire Twist. Most poppers will work; my standard is an all white popper with white bucktail and a splattering of red on the underbelly.

If, however, you prefer a more sedate Kariba angling experience, game cruising and fishing intermittently off the tender boat is a good option. Not only will this give you the opportunity of landing bigger fish, it also provides excellent game- and bird-viewing opportunities. Again, it is best to

concentrate on specific areas. The bigger rivers flowing into Kariba such as the Sengwa, Sanyati and Ume are all good options. Depth sounders will aid in finding the drop-offs indicating the submerged riverbeds of smaller streams and rivers. Another useful indication of old stream- and riverbeds is the abrupt end of timber. This generally marks a sudden drop-off. Chumming to bring the fish up and then fly fishing along these tree lines is very productive. When chumming, it is important to let your fly drift at the same depth and speed as the chum. Your fly should also resemble the chum as best as possible. James Christmas from Wild River Flies makes a great wounded kapenta pattern. Sink tip lines work well for this application. Rocky cliffs and boulder-strewn banks similarly provide good habitat for tigerfish and should not be ignored.

WHAT REALLY MATTERS

Now, back to the stool... it was while tying a new trace that I really got thinking. Sitting on the surprisingly comfortable stool, worn smooth by years of Batonka buttocks and exposure to the elements, the gravity of the situation struck me. The Batonka people, with their trademark nose bone and gap-tooth dental work, had lived in the Zambezi Valley for centuries. They were a proud tribe, subsistence farming, hunting and fishing on the flood plains. They were then moved to higher ground to make way for the dam, and, as they became absorbed into contemporary Zimbabwean life, their long-held customs became a thing of the past.

Here I was fishing for pure enjoyment. The Lady Jacqueline (a luxury houseboat) was 50 yards away, with a team of fantastic staff, including skipper, deckhand and a wonderful cook awaiting my return. I contemplated what the previous owner of the stool was up to when last he sat on it. Maybe he was keeping an eye on his grazing cattle, or could he have been repairing his fishing nets? I suppose I will never know. The one thing I am certain he was not doing, was casting a popper at tigers, catching them and then letting them go again before walking back to a floating mansion to eat a three course meal...

Now this may sound classist or condescending, but a conservation ethic is most definitely a function of one's living circumstances. As Abraham Maslow's Hierarchical Theory of Motivation suggests that as humans meet "basic needs" they seek to satisfy successively "higher needs" that occupy a set hierarchy. Explained very briefly, our first needs are physiological – the need to eat, sleep, breathe etc. This is followed by the need for safety and security – emotional, financial and physical. The need to belong and be loved follows this. After which comes our need to be respected, for self-respect and to respect others. If we are fortunate enough to have neutralised our first four basic needs, our final need is for personal growth – the instinctive need of humans to be the best they can be.

We fly fishers are privileged in that our passion allows for fulfilment of our upper three needs. Being part of a close group of fishing friends, or the angling fraternity, satisfies our need to belong. Landing a trophy fish, watching your buddy tempt a skittish wild brown with a size 18 dry, or tying your first fly will at some level fulfil our need for respect. And, finally, our need for personal growth. Here the opportunities are endless – sharing your passion with those around you, involvement with development and conservation programmes, appreciation of life, and generally being aware of the privileges that angling brings to your life. Without a doubt, we are a fortunate few. In pursuit of our angling passions, we are lent the tools to help benefit those people, places and organisations we come into contact with. Let's use them.